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I vs. Spy

By Robert W. Merry

I was sitting in my office, the counterespionage shop of a U.S. Army intelligence unit in West Germany, one day 14 years ago when in walked the new major who was about to take over the unit. He looked around at the five of us sitting there (a lieutenant in charge, a secretary and three counterespionage agents), and said, "This will do." Then he left.

Before long the five of us were moving out, and the major was moving in. He quickly procured a platform, upon which he placed his desk so he could look down upon anyone who ventured in for a visit. Next he took the flag display that had decorated the lobby and placed it on the platform behind his desk.

Great PR

The previous major's ordinary-sized office became a briefing room, with a long conference table and large maps of the German state that was our jurisdiction. The new major got a long, collapsible pointer so he could point to places on the maps. Then began a procession of officers from the environs who were treated to briefings on just what a great job we were doing, usually described in quantitative terms—how many active cases in the files, how many we had closed out, how many agent hours had been devoted to this or that kind of case.

It was great public relations, and I have no doubt that it helped advance the major in his chosen profession. But it didn't have much to do with our mission, which was protecting official secrets and catching Soviet-bloc spies targeted against U.S. forces.

In fact, there wasn't much I did during two years in Germany that had a great deal to do with that mission. My compatriots and I drank plenty of terrific German beer. We took nice three-day trips to such places as Heidelberg and Berchtesgaden. We opened up some cases and closed a few out. But we never came close to catching any spies.

These remembrances come to mind in the wake of all the espionage stories appearing in the public prints these days—the German spy scandal, the FBI agent recently nabbed with his Soviet mistress, the Walker spy ring targeted against the Navy. Clearly, our global adversaries in the espionage game have more on their minds than the size of their offices and intrabureaucratic public relations. And, clearly, Western efforts to deal with the espionage threat have been mediocre at best.

Nothing illustrates this better than the Walker escapades, which gave the Soviets what one retired Naval officer calls "a dream agent." So lax was security in the Navy, the unfolding case reveals, that one of the apprehended Walkers, young Michael, actually managed to store a 15-pound cache of classified documents near his bunk on the aircraft carrier Nimitz.

One might wonder what the counterintelligence arms of the military services are doing to thwart such activities. My own experiences indicate the answer is simply: not nearly enough.

We lacked the equipment required for effective action. We lacked the training. We lacked the leadership. About the only thing we didn't lack, I'm convinced, was the challenge of having plenty of East-bloc agents running amok in our jurisdiction.

A big problem we faced was institutional. The Army policy is that security generally is a command problem. That meant that commanders usually have final say on investigations within their commands.

At its most benign, this can mean lots of wasted time. One case concerned a semiliterate cook at a nearby officers' club. He had tried to force his affections upon a young dishwasher, who got tired of it and accused him of being an East-bloc agent. An investigation revealed that if he was a spy, he constituted a marvelous waste of our adversaries' time: He had no access to sensitive data and was hardly the kind of person to be entrusted with a spy mission anyway.

Nothing in the dishwasher's story checked out. But the general with jurisdiction over the officers' club, fearing a blemish on his record, couldn't be convinced. The result was endless days pursuing an investigation clearly leading nowhere.

No Clearance

The command-problem concept can also be much less benign. There was a case involving an Army photographer, a foreign national, who had become a highly placed general's pet factotum. The photographer routinely had access to areas for which he had no clearance. It turned out he had been implicated in a previous spy case and thus was ineligible for a security clearance.

Very delicate, of course. The general had been negligent or foolish. Yet he retained considerable control over the course of the investigation. His aim, clearly, was to see it fizzle so he could quietly ease the photographer aside and escape a potential embarrassment of incalculable proportions.

Finally, it was agreed that the investigation would proceed for a specified time; if nothing turned up by then it would be terminated. Nothing turned up. But much later I saw a short wire-service item involving a spy trial in Paris. One defendant had figured in the long-ago investigation that resulted in our photographer losing his security clearance.

Had the photographer, obviously a security risk, maintained contact with the Paris defendant? Had he been targeted against U.S. forces? If so, could he have been burned and turned against his handlers? We'll never know. Security is a command problem.

Then there was the problem of equipment—old and dysfunctional. Surveillance is difficult enough without having your old Volkswagen stall just as the Mercedes you're assigned to tail pulls out from a driveway. That happened to two colleagues, who were forced to get out and push-start the car. By that time the quarry was gone—and they had been pretty thoroughly burned anyway.

My own worst experience in that regard involved a Friday-night surveillance of a subject suspected of transporting documents to East Germany. Normally, we used cars equipped with radio and "switch plates"—license plates that can be quickly attached to the car and that can't be traced through the highway bureaucracy. But the officer in charge of such matters had neglected to get the switch plates renewed, so we had to use cars belonging to German nationals who worked as agents in our office.

They weren't pleased. Neither was I, because it meant we didn't have radio-equipped cars and had to use walkie-talkies with their long antennae and static noises.

We picked up the subject at his place of employment, an Army installation, and watched as he walked to a bus stop and boarded a bus. Through harrowing downtown traffic, I followed the bus—and three times narrowly missed smashing into it. Then our subject deboarded and disappeared into the subway. We lost him.

No big problem; we knew where he lived. We went there, and soon he showed up. That's when our problems began. It simply isn't possible to be inconspicuous sitting in a car on a German street, where the apartment buildings abut the sidewalks and the typical hausfrau spends at least 15 minutes of each hour washing windows. Soon we were the focus of attention throughout the neighborhood. The static noises from our walkie-talkies didn't help. We had no choice but to abort the operation. Since these weren't army cars, at least our engines started right up.

Why did we engage in such a silly surveillance? Because the case wasn't going anywhere, and group headquarters was clamoring for some action. The surveillance report, worthless as it was, kept headquarters off our backs for a few weeks.

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After some time, it was decided to confront the subject in a hostile interrogation. He denied any espionage involvement, and the case ended. But was he involved, as he was said to be by an informant who obviously knew much about his habits and activities? Did the cryptic post card mean anything? Could his homosexuality have been a point of leverage by hostile agents?

We'll never know. There are a lot of things about my experiences in Germany that we'll never know. I don't even think about it much anymore, except when another spy case hits the headlines.

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